

Defunding the Police as Environmental Justice

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Abstract

Policing, rooted in the surveillance of Black folks and used to subordinate minority communities, is often understood as an icon of institutional racism. Environmental racism refers to the policies that create and build on racial disparities, again in terms of the space in which people live. Food insecurity, climate change, and air pollution are the symptoms of environmental racism because they disproportionately impact low-income communities of color. This paper explores the connection between two responses to these forms of anti-Black violence embedded in space: the environmental justice movement and the defund the police movement. It argues that anti-Black violence, through policing, contributes to the normalization of environmental racism that primarily burdens Black and Brown communities. It closes with discussing the contribution that social workers could potentially provide to the environmental field and what a focus on the environment in which people live could mean for social work more broadly.

"I can't breathe"

For the past year, COVID-19 has created an environment of uncertainty. This alone caused the cyclical change of seasons to feel like unfamiliar moments in time. The pandemic also seemed to bring to the forefront the structural inequalities that are so deeply embedded within American society. These inequalities were reflected in the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on communities of color across the nation. The Center for Disease Control (CDC)

reported that Indigenous Americans were 2.4 times as likely to die from Covid-19 than White non-Hispanic Americans (Center for Disease Control, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, medical scholars highlighted the relationship between structural racism and Covid-19. Social determinants of health such as housing, food access, transportation, and employment were linked to Covid-19 outcomes as the poor quality of these determinants contributed to Black and Brown communities suffering higher infection and death rates of Covid-19 (Tai, Shah, Doubeni, et al., 2021).

As the pandemic exposed the need to address structural racism, further threats to Black and Brown lives continued on. Police violence against Black lives is one such issue. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked protests in all 50 states and across the globe—in countries such as Belgium, England, Brazil, and Australia. Participating in these protests put people at risk of contracting COVID-19; however, these protests were a needed release from the binds of being entrenched at home as well as an opportunity to express anger and grief at failing institutional structures. I debated participating in these protests. Being a Black woman, I knew that my melanin made me especially vulnerable to the excessive police force and violence historically employed by the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

I ultimately decided to participate in the protests and witnessed police violently attack protesters; this made me realize that I could never call the police again. Many of my memories of last summer are of police officers with their batons and riot gear. Naturally when I first heard the idea of “defunding the police,” I quickly supported this call to action. Defunding the police sounds like a radical idea and it was easy for some people to feel threatened by such changes. Creating new systems and institutions is often met with resistance. This is especially true when those in power are challenged. As I began to unpack what it meant to defund the police, I leaned into the movement even more.

In this essay I will explore the connection between the call for defunding of the police and the environmental justice movement. I will argue that anti-Black violence such as policing contributes to the normalization of environmental racism, a type of state-sanctioned violence that primarily burdens and harms communities of color. Furthermore, I will discuss the importance of social workers engaging with environmental justice. My objective in the final section of this paper is to provide a call to action for social work professionals and students—a call to see the contributions that social workers can provide to the environmental justice movement.

Environmental Racism

In 1982, the residents of Warren County, North Carolina, protested the state-sanctioned dumping of toxic soil into the landfill of Afton, a small, predominately African American town in the county (Skelton & Miller, 2016). Their protest gained national attention, including coverage by the New York Times, which described “125 demonstrators who marched two miles to the entrance of the landfill” being “met by 60 riot-equipped North Carolina highway patrol officers,” who arrested a great many; the protesters were then loaded on “to waiting prison buses that took them to Warrenton, the county seat” so the PCB-laden soil could be dumped (“55 Arrested,” 1982).

These events led civil rights leader Dr. Benjamin Chavis (1982) to coin the term “environmental racism.” He defined this form of racism as: Racial discrimination in defining environmental policies, discriminatory enforcement of regulations and laws, deliberate targeting of minority communities as hazardous waste dumping sites, official sanctioning of dangerous pollutants in minority communities, and the exclusion of people of color from environmental leadership positions (as cited in Schlangen, 2020).

Chavis’s naming helped conceptualize the form of violence that was taking place in Warren County. Prior to the birth of environmental justice and its terminology there were no “formal expressions” of it in environmental law or policy (Carder, n.d). At its

core, the environmental justice movement focuses on environmental inequities of risk and vulnerability. The environmental justice movement, which is led primarily by people of color, seeks to advance policies that would address the environmental burdens placed on minority communities. In 1991, leaders from all 50 states convened at the National People of Color Leadership Summit to form the agenda of the environmental justice movement. The summit was the first of its kind and helped to broaden the movement beyond a fight against anti-toxins. The summit eventually led to the creation of guiding principles that informed organizing, networking, and advocacy efforts. This attempt to improve the environmental quality of communities of color was bolstered by President Clinton, who then issued an executive order to address environmental injustice within low income and BIPOC communities through the reform of federal laws and regulations (Bullard, 2008).

Racism within the physical environment is constantly being debated for its legitimacy by individuals who do not identify with environmental justice communities and hold the academic and political power to legitimize or diminish its legality. Within this struggle is a type of violence that is inherently elitist. In 2005, for instance, an administrator from the Environmental Protection Agency attempted to remove race as a priority factor, "scrubbing racial discrimination from the definition of environmental justice" (Huang, 2014). Environmental racism exists because the institutions that govern the environment are racist. The Dakota Access Pipeline provides a recent example. The protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline began because members of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation were not properly consulted about the pipeline route, which threatened to harm a main water source for the tribe (Hersher, 2017). In response to the tribe's protest and legal actions, the U.S. government responded with violence. Numerous indigenous activists, protesters, and allies were harmed by the use of brutal police violence. Police used pepper spray and guard dogs to deter the protesters from standing in solidarity against the pipeline.

Along with overt violence, government institutions can yield policy to justify the polluting of low income, Black and Brown communities because they do not always have the economic capital to challenge these policy decisions. At different levels of government policy, decisions are made based on economic frameworks, such as cost and benefit. This analysis may prioritize sustaining a city's fiscal resources but may do so in a way that divest from creating sustainable communities. An example is the City of Chicago's plan to move General Iron, a metal shredding plant, to the South Side. The plant has resided in Lincoln Yards, a wealthy, White neighborhood in the city. The community there has been advocating for the removal of the plant, which has numerous environmental violations. It is unfortunate that the plant existed in Lincoln Yards in the first place. No community should be subjected to air and water pollution for the sake of capitalism. The city's solution to move the plant to South Deering, a South Side neighborhood of the city of predominantly low-income, Black and Latinx residents, is evidence of the unjust burden of environmental hazards that Black and Brown communities face.

Institutions can also frame their actions as sustainable and necessary by demonizing communities of color as incapable of maintaining a clean and safe environment for themselves. This framing can be better understood as *White narratives of justification*. These cast abusive actions toward people of color as necessary (Diversi, 2016). The justification for moving the plant to South Deering is that it will create jobs for residents. This reasoning is reflective of the ways that marginalized communities and their natural environments are exploited. South Deering residents should not have to choose between their health and employment at a toxic plant. These communities deserve, rather, reparations; reparations for years of economic subjugation and not subjection to environmental racism. Investment in job training and the creation of sustainable, eco-friendly employment can provide communities with the economic power to advocate against the placement of environmental hazards within their community. The police are one such environmental hazard.

Policing as Anti-Black violence

The anti-Black violence of policing makes the physical environment for Black folks essentially uninhabitable. Like racist environmental policies, policing is deliberately life-threatening. Policing can be wielded by government institutions to incriminate Black and Brown communities in the same way these institutions can pass policies that pollute the local water systems of a community. Policing can penetrate the environment in a way that reflects environmental racism. The system of policing can do this because of the ways in which Blackness itself is seen as a threat to the natural environment. Therefore, government institutions employ police to control the perceived threat. Contextually policing within Black and Brown communities is understood as an act of institutional racism. Institutional racism is reflected in the social laws and customs creating systemic inequalities (Grimshaw, 2020).

Police tend to target poor communities of color leading to higher rates of criminalization and imprisonment and therefore reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black and Brown people as inherently delinquent. The mental associations between race and crime can lead police officers to hold xenophobic and racist attitudes toward people of color (Owusu-Bempah, 2017). The result is over policing, the unjust murders of BIPOC people, and an increased view of these communities as threatening.

What does it mean to defund the police?

The City of Chicago spends 40% of its general operations budget on policing despite police reports that show violent crime has long been on the decline (Ballesteros, 2020). While violent crime has actually decreased, Chicago is portrayed in the media as a city riddled with excessive gun violence. Due to these narratives, certain neighborhoods within the city are criminalized. They are cast as dangerous, which in turns justifies their surveillance. Rather than invest in these communities through economic development, education, and access to mental health resources, the local

government chooses to spend \$215 per Chicagoan on the police force (Ballesteros, 2020).

To defund the police is to “reallocate or redirect funding away from police departments to other government agencies” (Ray, 2020). Defunding the police therefore means divesting from massive police budgets and investing in those communities that suffer most from police presence. Defunding the police is controversial because of the perceptions of racialized communities. The police are often called out to “de-escalate” crises around mental health, domestic violence, housing insecurity, and substance abuse cases that often need the expertise of a social worker or other competent professionals. The police alone cannot create public safety. When they are called out to intervene in these crises, further harm is perpetuated by the criminalization of the individual(s) in need. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a majority of 911 calls about mental health crises are addressed by police, resulting in jails becoming the safety net for the individual in need (SAMHSA, 2020).

It is unreasonable to expect the police to effectively respond to the public safety needs of all citizens when the practice of policing is not based upon protecting all citizens. Predominantly affluent, White neighborhoods tend to feel safe with police officers. A poll by the *New York Times* found that 45% of Black Americans felt racially targeted by the police as compared to 4% of White Americans (Weitzer & Brunson, 2015).

What does defunding the police mean for the environment?

As a Chicago native whose childhood was mostly spent in a neighborhood on the city’s West Side, I know the violence that comes at the hands of the police. One summer, when I was eight-years old, my cousin and I were riding our bikes around our neighborhood—down familiar blocks and across the usual alleyways. A block away from my grandparents’ home, a police car hit my cousin. I can still remember the officers just standing there—no empathy, no

remorse. As my outraged uncle challenged the officers about their carelessness, my cousin was cared for by neighbors. Although my experiences with police have been troubling, I would be lying if I said the police have never made me feel safe. This country's effort to portray them as heroes has only left me conflicted. Who protects me and my community if they are the ones we need protection from? Today, I understand that my community, like many others, will never be able to feel the perceived safety that police forces claim to provide. When police are present in my neighborhood, school, local grocery stores, these spaces instantly become an environment in which my safety feels threatened. It is as if the police act as toxins permeating the air and threatening my ability to breathe.

Environmental racism is by design. Food apartheid, high levels of air pollution, lack of access to green spaces, and police violence all disproportionately impact Black and Brown neighborhoods. These injustices impact the physical and mental wellbeing of entire communities. It is critical to understand that these injustices are a type of state- sanctioned violence connected to the land.

Despite the odds, environmental justice communities continue to pave the way to a more eco-equitable world. Indigenous communities have been prominent environmental justice advocates. Native nations have made great accomplishments in holding federal governments and their co-conspirators accountable for violations against the land. State- sanctioned violence via police brutality has also been used to control their activism efforts. Police threaten the environmental justice movement and act as weapons against communities that speak out on violations of the right to clean air, water, and land. Policing creates an environment that is inaccessible to those who do not benefit from whiteness. They excessively patrol the streets of minority communities which only further contributes to the depiction of them as inherently violent and endangers the psychological and physical well-being of residents. Policing is a socially constructed environmental hazard and defunding the police is

necessary to the creation of a safe environment for minority communities.

The protests of summer 2020 was evidence that through solidarity, we can effectively advocate for a cleaner, safer, and healthier environment. Solidarity is critical to defunding the police and promoting environmental justice. BIPOC-led organizations, activists, community members and leaders, politicians and artists can collaborate to call on local governments to eradicate anti-Black violence, environmental injustice, and recognition of Indigenous lands. Cities across the nation are slowly realizing the potential of defunding police departments. Last year the city of Austin cut their police budget by \$150 million (Venkataramanan, 2020) and then utilized the reallocated funds to purchase a hotel to create transitional housing for people experiencing housing insecurity. San Francisco plans to cut \$120 million from the police budget to reinvest in Black communities, fund COVID-19 response, as well as other initiatives. These are just a few examples of the potential of defunding the police. If municipal governments continue to follow suit and invest in creating resilient, green, and equitable communities, we can rest in knowing that the safety of our world has never depended upon police. Rather, the safety comes from the ways in which we care for one another and this Earth.

A Call to Action for Social Workers

In this paper I attempted to connect two movements. Environmental justice is a movement that is traditionally focused on the natural environment, while “defund the police” is a movement centered in the socially constructed environment. Together these movements aim to make geographic space physically safer for Black and Brown people. Social workers study the environment, its layers, and how social inequalities within them impact human development. However, it appears that the natural environment is a layer that the field has not studied in a meaningful way. I would like to bring attention to the lack of social workers in the environmental field and encourage students

and professionals to engage with environmental justice, policy, and advocacy.

Matters of police violence are not ignored by the field of social work. Social workers have had a role in addressing racist policing policies primarily through decarceration advocacy and research. In the summer of 2020, in response to the national protests, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) showed support for redirecting police funding into social services. However, the organization avoided using the language of “defund the police.” Instead, the language used, and the proposals offered, were around police reform, dismantling racism within policing, and community policing. As a student of social work, I was disappointed by this conservative approach to addressing policing. This language reflects the profession’s enmeshment in systems and institutions that will continue to uphold policing for as long as it is profitable.

Social workers are known to “wear many hats.” The field is intersectional and therefore social workers can take on a variety of roles to promote social justice. This is an important aspect of the discipline. Yet, some social issues fail to receive attention from the field even when these issues impact the vulnerable communities’ social workers serve. Environmental justice is an issue that has not been prioritized in the social work agenda. Climate change, air and water pollution, and food scarcity are issues that impact the most vulnerable. The causes of these global threats can be understood through a variety of lenses, such as geography, policy, and economics. These disciplines do an efficient job of framing, evaluating, and measuring these environmental hazards. For example, many environmental justice scholars within the field of geography are critical about the discipline’s roots in Eurocentric, colonial values. According to Pulido (2000), the field of geography fails to include the “role of structural and hegemonic forms of racism in contributing to such inequalities” (p. 1). White privilege is so prominent within the field of geography that the field has relied upon a narrow understanding of racism (Pulido, 2000).

At the same time, social work can find its niche within the environmental field by lending it an anti-oppressive framework. This framework could potentially bring nuance to the environmental field, providing policy makers, climate scientists, economists, and other professionals with a rigorous trauma-informed and equity-focused lens. Social workers already seek to understand the environment and its layers to better address the needs of individuals and communities. The discipline's framework of the social environment could be enhanced by a comprehensive understanding of the natural environment.

In the past, the field of social work has had a reputation of "supporting the status quo" as it tends to give people tools to cope with, rather than address, systemic issues (Muldoon, 2006). Over the years, social work has grown to take a macro-level approach. Adopting a focus on environmental issues can be an opportunity for the profession to continue its expansion. Environmental issues will disproportionately impact those who experience poverty, homelessness, and Black and Brown communities and women (the populations with which social workers tend to work). If social workers fail to meet the moment in addressing environmental issues, will it truly be able claim its mission to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people" (National Association, 2017)? A focus on environmental issues is the way forward for social work.

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